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| MediaTitle | The Star                     |             |            |
| Date       | 19 Nov 2019                  | Color       | Full Color |
| Section    | StarTwo                      | Circulation | 175,986    |
| Page No    | 1T03                         | Readership  | 527,958    |
| Language   | English                      | ArticleSize | 2283 cm²   |
| Journalist | Sim Leoi Leoi                | AdValue     | RM 114,895 |
| Frequency  | Daily                        | PR Value    | RM 344,685 |



Photo: AFP Relaxnews



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# There's no smoke without fire

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THE haze may have been blown away from Malaysia with the seasonal change in wind direction but this doesn't mean that the smoke has cleared.

Sadly, the clear blue skies and sunny weather we see now are only a temporary respite because the haze has proven to be a persistent, perennial problem since the late 1990s.

While its severity will depend on a number of factors like wind direction and the presence of El Nino – remarkably, the recent haze wasn't as bad as that in 2015 or even 1997, which were El Nino years, when ocean currents warm up – climate change seems to only worsen the dry and hot conditions for the fires that produce the haze.

Haze in Malaysia is transboundary pollution arising from the smoke of millions of hectares of peatland burning mostly in Kalimantan and Sumatra. (Peatland comprises partially decayed vegetation or organic matter that is particularly flammable when drained.)

Almost as certain as the haze returning and affecting close to 500 million people in South-East Asia is the usual flurry of complaints between Indonesia and its neighbours.

This time, Indonesia's Environment Forestry Minister Siti Nurbaya Bakar put herself in the crosshairs when she claimed that the haze in Malaysia country was due to our own open burning. While there were fires on peat land in Johan Setia near Klang, Selangor, and in Kuching during the Haze period, they were nowhere near as bad as the fires in Indonesia.

In her reply to Siti Nurbaya, Energy, Science, Technology, Environment, and Climate Change Minister Yeo Bee Yin pointed to the data of Indonesian hotspots from the Asean Specialised Meteorological Centre in Singapore, which numbered thousands.

In a series of now famous tweets, Yeo had also said that the Malaysian government was exhausting all diplomatic channels and had even "extended a helping hand" to help Indonesia manage the annual smog.

At one time, even ordinary Malaysians were wondering: "Why can't Indonesia just stop burning?"

## Put out the fire

However, according to Global Environment Centre (GEC) director Faizal Parish, the matter isn't as straightforward as that.

Instead of offering aid to Indonesia during the height of the haze crisis when the fires are already raging on thousands of hectares of peat land and choking people with the smoke, he argues that more efforts should be put into preventing the flames from ever starting in the first place. Reports often attribute the burning to farmers and plantations using fire as a cheap and fast way to clear land.

The GEC, which was established in 1998, was formally appointed by the Asean secretariat in 2003 to act as a lead partner in the Asean peatland management initiative, is based in Malaysia.

It is currently helping to prevent fires in more than 100,000ha of peatland in Malaysia as well as advising both the Malaysian and

The region's governments can do more to help Indonesia with the yearly haze problem – by helping out before the fires actually start on peatland.



Prevention of fires in peat is much more cost effective than fighting fires. – Photos: Global Environment Centre

Indonesian governments on such strategies.

Faizal says that if Malaysia wants to solve the problem, it should offer positive assistance and funding to Indonesia for fire prevention and sustainable development measures.

"This support should not only be offered when the fires are already burning as by then it would be too late.

"It must be given beforehand for prevention work and to support the establishment and strengthening of partnerships between the local government, the private sector and the local communities to work together to prevent fires," he says in a recent email interview.

GEC used to support a programme in Harapan Jaya, Riau, in Sumatra, from 2011 to 2015, which he describes as "very successful" in that no fires were recorded in that village during this last haze period.

Even so, he says it is very difficult for villages and groups like GEC or Yayasan Mitra Insan, which GEC works with in Indonesia, to secure resources for fire prevention.

"It is relatively easy to find funds from local governments to fight fires but extremely difficult to find funds to prevent fires.

"However, prevention of fires in peat is much more cost effective than fighting fires – maybe only between 15% to 25% of the costs," points out Faizal, adding that these efforts need to be ongoing.

He laments that in years when there were fewer fires or that these have been prevented by various actions, there was no pressure to set aside further resources to maintain or expand such programmes.

While the peatland ecosystem is considered to be the world's most efficient carbon sink, any fire in it is notoriously difficult to put out (as Singaporean activist Benjamin

## The haze in numbers

**How many countries were affected by this year's haze?**

● **Seven** Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei while there were also reports of the haze reaching even Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam.

**How severe was this year's burning in Indonesia?**

● In September, Indonesia's national disaster agency was reported as saying that **328,724ha** of land had been burnt this year from January to August alone. By the end of September, a total of **857,756ha** had been burned.

● At its height, there were **19,387 hotspots** detected in Kalimantan, and **12,555** in Sumatra, according to the Asean Specialised

Meteorological Centre. This is still considerably lower than **33,631** hotspots detected in Kalimantan and **24,488** in Sumatra during the 2015 haze.

● Over **9,000** military, police and disaster agency personnel were roped in to fight the fires in Indonesia.

● In Malaysia, Deputy Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Raja Kamarul Bahrin told Parliament that there were nearly **1,500** cases of open burning and forest fires between August and September.

● Johor has the most number of cases at **580**, followed by Selangor (226), Sarawak (193), Sabah (179) and Perak (85).

● At one time, over **2,000** schools around the country had to close, affecting over two million students.

● On Sept 20, Sri Aman in Sarawak recorded an Air Pollutant Index reading of **402** at 8am, which is classified as hazardous.

● According to a World Bank report in 2016, the economic impact of forest fires and haze in 2015 totalled up to **221tril** Indonesian rupiah or **US\$16.1bil (RM66.72bil)**.

● **All 10** member countries have signed and ratified the Asean Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution.

Tay can testify in the story opposite).

Malaysia, insists Faizal, should not just leave it to Indonesia to solve the problem of open burning and the resulting haze, adding that the country is already doing a "massive amount of work".

"But in dry years, such as 2019, the work by the Indonesian government is not enough to prevent or control the fires," he says.

For one, peatland covers 21 million hectares in Indonesia, about 60% to 70% of which has previously been opened up and degraded

and thus made vulnerable to fire.

"In the past 15 years, more than five million hectares of peatland have burnt repeatedly," says Faizal.

Furthermore, stopping fires and rehabilitating 1ha of peatland may cost up to US\$10,000 (RM41,400); with some five million hectares to deal with, the total may eventually come up to US\$50bil (RM207bil) for Indonesia.

## We didn't start the fire

As to the question from many

Malaysians about why the Indonesians just can't seem to stop burning, Faizal says from GEC's experience in Harapan Jaya, the farmers themselves have learned not to start fires.

"The main problems they faced were when outsiders or immigrants moved into the area and then tried to use fire to clear or claim land," he says.

While there is still a minority of farmers who may resort to fire, the problem usually occurs, explains Faizal, when the flames spread out of control into nearby areas, espe-



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Faizal (left) with stakeholders at a peatland site in Indonesia with community



Villagers at Harapan Jaya in Riau, Sumatra, during one of the fire prevention trainings organised by the Global Environment Centre.

cially land with low water tables due to drought, development, plantation projects or simply the lack of good water management by the villages.

"Enforcement alone cannot solve the problem.

"While some portion of the fires are deliberately lit, many of these have just spread from small areas into the village and forest land and get out of control.

"Others may start from discarded cigarettes or spread from camp fires," says Faizal, adding that once these fires start it is often very dif-

ficult to prove the actual cause or the culprit.

"Even if people are caught, it is very difficult to prove this in a court," he says.

Local communities in Indonesia often get blamed for starting fires, admits Faizal.

"But from our observations, sometimes, an important contributing factor is the disruption of the natural hydrology of the peatland by the plantation companies," he says.

The drainage and boundary canals constructed by these large

plantations, contends Faizal, disrupt the natural flow of water to the village areas.

"As a result, large areas of peatland in villages adjacent to plantations are drying out and becoming more and more vulnerable to fire," he says.

While the Indonesian government has in the past three years focused on forcing plantation companies to improve water management and regularly monitor and report water levels, Faizal says its implementation is directly financed by the planta-

tion companies.

The programme currently has 10,000 monitoring points in 3.2 million hectares of peatland managed by large plantation companies.

However, Faizal points out that there is no equivalent programme for community land or the forest and protected areas.

"Due to lack of resources the government has only been able to undertake small scale or pilot activities in these areas.

"As a result, they remain very vulnerable to fire," he says.

This means that any aid offered by Malaysia to Indonesia when the haze of smoke is already blowing over our way is actually of little to no help at all.

Instead, Faizal argues that it is necessary to put into place long-term and continuing programmes to empower local communities, local governments and the private sector to work together to prevent these fires.

"It is not possible to solve the problems through short term programmes and campaigns," he says.